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ABSTRACT

Boundaries are drawn, and essential elements in the evaluation of school change are suggested by a veteran public school system assistant superintendent in charge of performing evaluations for decision makers at the local level. The following essential elements are considered: (1) credibility--the most prized and critical of the elements of evaluation; (2) cooperation of decision makers--obtaining and keeping the cooperation of the Superintendent and the Board of Education; (3) adoption of an eclectic attitude about evaluation methodology--being fairly conversant with all current evaluation methods and how each method's component parts can be blended into a whole, a design or composition that when completed is understood and used by the client; and (4) adopting of self-imposed limits--the ability to know when to say no to requests to evaluate, e.g. not trying to evaluate a program that doesn't exist, and not evaluating personnel if the role is that of a program evaluator. The evaluator who evaluates programs almost always is disliked by his fellow educators, and when he attempts to evaluate people as well, generates immediate, long term, irreversible hatred to the point where cooperation to conduct future program evaluations will never occur. (RL)

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Essential Elements In An Evaluation Of School Change

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Essential Elements In An Evaluation

Of School Change

Context

It is difficult to identify those things that would be considered "essential elements in an evaluation of school change". Essential elements are the minimum necessary components that one must have in order to evaluate some form of change in school practice or program. One could begin to identify those "essential elements" by developing a "shopping list" set of conditions and components that are required to obtain timely, valid, reliable data to draw some defensible inferences regarding change. That task has been done by numerous writers including Popham (1975), Stufflebeam (1968), Provus (1971), Hammond (1969), and perhaps an additional hundred or so other writers and teachers who "profess" about the art of program evaluation. I could not do a more thorough job than they, and will not attempt that approach here.

What I will attempt here is a lesser job than the model builders. I will attempt to provide the perspective of a journeyman evaluator who has conducted or managed sixty-three program evaluations over the past 16 years.

My environment is the public school system, not a university nor a lab, center, foundation, private for profit, or non profit technical assistance center or a state or federal global planner of evaluations,

simply a public school system assistant superintendent performing evaluations in an effort to provide data to decision makers at the local level. I have described this environment in greater detail than is available in this paper Barber (1972). Some aspects of that environment however bear repeating here.

First, it is a very political and often punitive environment if the evaluator reports data that is not liked by a segment of the community Hendrickson & Barber (1980). Second, it is surrounded by a public that mistrusts almost every major decision made by the administration or board, (school closure, budget increase, program cuts, etc.) Barber (1976), Barber (1979c) and the evaluator is often responsible for those decisions Barber (1977). Third, that environment is generally isolated from those developing new evaluation methodology Barber (1977), Cooley (1980), Schutz (1976). Yet, with all of these problems, this is an environment that allows productivity, diversity, experimentation and change. It is here that the study of evaluation methodology is put to the test. It is here where evaluation techniques can be forged, then honed into a working tool that can be used as a positive effect in education as a whole.

How one works in this environment must be carefully thought out. "Should the evaluator judge the quality of a program or non program and recommend changes or should facts simply be reported and let others judge. Should he preach or should he meddle...at what point, if ever does the evaluator stop preaching (simply presenting data) and start meddling

(attempting to modify parts of the system)" Barber (1979c). For the past few years there has been a gentle debate within the evaluation network concerning the political role of the evaluator. "Scriven (1967) took the view that the evaluator should be a judge and in that role perform an evaluation of a program and pass judgement on the quality of the program being evaluated; thereby taking an actual role in the modification of the system. Stake (1967), in his early work considered the role of the evaluator to be an assistant in judging the quality of the programs evaluated. Provus (1969) indicated that the evaluator should be a party to the decision making process, but separate from it, i.e., not usurp the role of the administrator or decision maker. Hammond (1969), Stufflebeam (1968), and Alkin (1969) all suggest that evaluation results are to be used by the decision makers and can assist in decision making but, "the evaluator...should be independent." Barber (1979c) The point here is that the "essential elements" of evaluation are different according to the position adopted by the evaluator regarding the use of evaluation data and the role of the evaluator in the decision making process.

The role that this evaluator has taken is most closely aligned with the role described by Scriven, yet is different in the sense that when one is working in the public school sector as an evaluator, one must make sure that evaluation data is used as a part of the decision making process and therefore one must "meddle" with that process. (Barber (1980)

What I have attempted to do by this point is to draw some boundaries around the task of suggesting the essential elements in the evaluation

of school change. The following elements that this writer suggests are to be considered in the context of 1) An evaluator working within the public school system where programs are to be evaluated; 2) an evaluator working in a semi-hostile environment, surrounded by colleges who really do not like to be evaluated and certainly do not like to have the results of those program evaluations made public; 3) an evaluator working in the public arena where generally the public is at best distrusting of any data released by an agent of the school administration or board; 4) an evaluator who, in order to get evaluation data used, in the best interest of children in the district, meddles with the decision making process in order to get the data public and considered by the board and administration.

With these boundaries in mind, the following essential elements are considered.

I. Credibility

The single most critical, essential element is that of credibility. The person or agency performing an evaluation must be credible, must be believed by the recipients of the evaluation results. The reasons are clear, especially when an evaluation result suggests or recommends a change in previous practice. By definition, a recommendation to change a previous practice indicates that the previous practice is inadequate. Someone was doing something wrong, not doing something the program initiators said would be done, not doing anything, or doing something very different from what the program was intended to do. The person

responsible for the program is not going to take kindly to an evaluation or an evaluator that finds fault with that persons past practice. By the time the evaluation results get to the decision makers, i.e., Board or Superintendent, the maligned program manager will have accumulated a political following and will be lobbying that decision maker to ignore the findings of the evaluation. The program staff will protest that no change is necessary and the evaluators are evil, nasty, nit pickers that should not have looked at the program in the first place. This is the critical point of any/every evaluation performed to provide data for decision making about a program in a functioning public school setting. This is the point where the credibility of the evaluator or the evaluation agency is essential. Only by establishing a track record of excellence, few unreported errors, impecible honesty, and successful resistance to political pressure in the past can the evaluation agency even get its data to the decision maker for them to consider.

If you want to experience this political phenomena in action, set about evaluating the effectiveness of any community school program in any public school system in the country. This type of evaluation provides a post graduate course in the politics of educational decision making for any evaluator foolhardy enough to attempt it. Hendrickson & Barber (1980)

Credibility is hard to obtain and harder to keep once earned. It is however, the most prized and critical of those elements that make up the fabric of the art we call evaluation.

II. Cooperation of Decision Makers

This essentially means obtaining and keeping the cooperation of the Superintendent and Board of Education. William Cooly (1980) In a draft copy of a paper sent to me says it well. "The most critical task in a large urban school district is to develop a close working relationship with the Superintendent. You certainly can't do much without this knowledge and consent, and he can do a lot toward school improvement when armed with relevant, timely information. A key client group is the nine member school board." Cooly goes on to cite the necessity of developing a cooperative working relationship with the Superintendent and Board. I would add the additional following four points that an "in house" evaluator must strive for.

1. Obtain the Superintendents and Boards willingness to allow evaluations of ongoing programs that are district funded and district wide.
2. Get the Superintendent and Board to take some time to learn about evaluation as a tool in increasing the effectiveness of their decision making process.

3. Obtain the Board and Superintendent's assurance that they will not stifle the results of any evaluation, not edit or change results to suit the political climate of the day.
4. Get them to be willing to implement changes suggested by the results of an evaluation.

III. Adopt an eclectic attitude about Evaluation Methodology

The quest is to find the best method to conduct an evaluation of a program that will avoid type I and type II errors, yet is timely, reliable, informative and can be understood and used by the decision makers.

The answer to the search seems to be that everything works, but nothing works the way the designers say it will. The art of conducting an evaluation in a public school setting is the art of designing a method by selecting a bit from here and a pinch from there, producing a unique formula for each particular unique evaluation question or problem.

Eclectisism rules the day--primarily because we have not found any method that works the way the methodologists say it will in their texts. There are only some "rules of thumb" that seem to work. For example, if a program has clearly defined goals and objectives and the evaluation task is to determine whether or not, or to what extent, the program is being conducted

according to its written descriptors, then start with Provus (1971). If an added task is to determine whether or not it is being managed well, then add the process component of the C.I.P.P. model. Stufflebeam (1968) If an added task is to determine if the program is more or less effective than another similar program then add the C.I.P.P. product component into the design or regress completely and go to experimental methodology. Generally you can use Hammonds facet model as an organizer to keep track of possible contingencies you may miss otherwise. If the program has a community involvement component consider Stakes recent work or perhaps Wolfe (1974).

The message is, at this point in time, that you must be fairly conversant with all current methods. None is complete in that you can use it as the author intended. All should be considered and the Gestalt is valuable as a cognitive organizer in the design of each unique study. Methodology has not (and this writer hopes it may never) reached the stage where a particular method is dictated on the occasion of a particular question or problem.

It does not seem desirable for us to develop a static system or method to conduct evaluations in rigidly defined ways. As a discipline we are not yet free of experimental methodology. Experimental methodology is fine when it can be used as intended. In the social-political mileau of educational program evaluation it is usually inadequate.

A great deal has been written about many methods of program evaluation. It seems that each writer is striving to describe THE way to conduct an evaluation. Although the effort is commendable it seems a bit misguided. Program evaluation is an art form and best remain so. The evaluator is best compared to an artist with a palette full of various methods, he must be knowledgeable about the composition of each and how its component parts can be blended into a whole, a design or composition that when completed is understood and used by the client.

IV. Adopt self-imposed limits

There are two parts to this element. The first is the "Unicorn Phenomena" or don't get caught trying to evaluate a program that does not exist. The most frequent frustrating thing that occurs to the "in-house" evaluator is the request to evaluate a non-existent program. The Board, the Superintendent or the Assistant Superintendent for Instruction will request an evaluation of program X. The evaluation team is asked to design an evaluation that will provide data to discontinue, modify, or continue program X. After a cursory examination prior to developing a design, the evaluator finds that each building, each classroom, each teacher is doing something different, all calling what they are doing, Program X. Program descriptors are

confusing or non-existent, intended outcomes are not stated; a program does not exist. Don't try to evaluate program X, drastic measures are called for here. This is the time to recommend that the university based evaluator or the private for profit evaluation company be brought in. No one will believe that program X does not exist because it is usually an ongoing program such as the reading, math or science program, gone awry. You must be aware that you cannot be a prophet in your own town. To deal with the "Unicorn" programs you must go outside.

The second element here is maintenance of separate functions between program evaluation and personnel evaluation. You cannot do both at once, more than one time, in the same school district. If your role is a program evaluator, do not be tempted to evaluate the people in the system, outside of your own staff. You will be asked time and time again, resist at all costs. The evaluator who evaluates programs almost always is disliked by his fellow educators, the evaluator who also attempts to evaluate people as well, generates immediate, long term, irreversible hatred to the point where cooperation to conduct future program evaluations will never occur.

There are other things that previous writers have considered "essential elements" in the evaluation of school change. They include, but are not limited to such things as an adequate budget, reasonable timelines, cooperation of various segments of the school population, well trained staff, adequate computer time, and the list goes on. These are all important

elements but not necessarily essential elements. Essential elements are, at least in this writers world, limited to credibility, cooperation of decision makers, comprehensive knowledge of many methods combined with a willingness to be eclectic in choosing a method to evaluate and finally an ability to know when to say no to requests to evaluate.

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